



Mark Matthews with his dog, Bounder.



# Creature Comfort



Mario Bessette and Lola.



Valerie Nicholson holds a photo of her departed companion, Chalo.

**A pet's love can sustain a guardian amidst addiction, homelessness and abuse; Charlie's Food Bank and other SPCA programs lend a helping hand**

It was his dog who kept him going.

When he was homeless, squatting in a makeshift hut in an industrial area of East Vancouver, it was Mark Matthews' golden retriever, Bounder, who gave him a reason to get up every day.

A Canadian Armed Forces vet who was injured in an explosion, Matthews had struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder and addiction before he and Bounder found each other. Bounder was given to Matthews as a gift, after he noticed the dog was always left outside in a yard by his former guardian and offered to walk him every day.

"I never expected to get a dog," says Matthews, who grew up in Eastern Canada before joining the Navy. "It was October 4, 2008 – 10 years ago – and I didn't even realize the importance of that date until later... October 4, 1960, was the date my parents adopted me. If that's not a sign, I don't know what is."

Matthews had Bounder for four years when he fell behind on student loans and couldn't afford a home.

"Bounder became my soulmate. He was my therapist, my companion, my friend. He listened without judging and he aimed to please so much."

When Matthews went to Mission Possible, a food bank on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES), to help him through this rough time, he found out about the BC SPCA's Charlie's Pet Food Bank, which operates out of the same location every Thursday. Charlie's provides free and low-cost pet services – including pet food and supplies and a once-a-month veterinary clinic – for people who are surviving on a low income.

Matthews started visiting Charlie's

manager of animal welfare Kim Monteith, well-known among the residents of the DTES, has spent thousands of hours in the neighbourhood since that time, building trust and relationships with many who find it hard to open up to people in positions of authority.

She can be found at Charlie's every Thursday, handing out supplies and connecting with pet guardians in the community.

"I think there can be a stigma about low-income or homeless people having pets, but you can see how dedicated so many of them are to their animal companions – many will go without food to make sure their pet gets fed," Monteith says.

"Some people are living in their cars or on the street because there's no affordable

She and her partner heard about Charlie's through Monteith, who helped them get Chalo spayed, and offered pet food and supplies.

Now clean for several years, Nicholson is a proud grandmother who travels to speak at conferences, schools and events about her experience, helping educate others about addiction.

"I think it's so important to have an animal to give that unconditional love – many people may never have experienced any kind of love, so it means so much," she says, with a catch in her voice. "When the rest of the world turns its back on you... a pet gives you love without judgment and gives you self-worth and a reason to be a better person."

Nicholson started volunteering for



Left & Centre: Mario unloads a BC SPCA van for Charlie's. Right: A Charlie's client arrives to pick up food for his cat.

to help keep Bounder fed and healthy and when Bounder developed an ACL (anterior cruciate ligament) issue, he was referred to the BC SPCA Vancouver Animal Hospital, where they helped keep his four-legged companion comfortable with medication, often given to him for little or no cost.

"I don't know what I would have done without access to Charlie's or to the vet services Bounder needed throughout his life," Matthews says. "Having that access meant so much. It meant I could take care of him."

Charlie's Pet Food Bank was launched in 2000 by the BC SPCA's chief animal health officer at the time, Dr. Jamie Lawson. BC SPCA

pet-friendly housing available to them and they don't want to give up their pet. For many, their pet is their only true friend, their only family."

With the help of Charlie's, and through charitable work done at the BC SPCA's Vancouver Animal Hospital, low-income

pet guardians can make sure their pets receive necessary care and treatment.

When Valerie Nicholson was battling addiction to crystal meth and crack and living on Vancouver's DTES, it was her dog, Chalo, who gave her a purpose.

"When I had Chalo to look after, I started looking after myself," Nicholson says. "It gets you thinking, 'If something happens to me, what will happen to my dog?'"

Charlie's to give something back to those who had helped her when she needed it most. The same goes for Mario Bessette, who was living on the streets because of a lack of affordable housing options for his two dogs, Susie and Lola, when Monteith asked him if he needed help.

Monteith and Charlie's made sure his dogs received the food they needed, Bessette says, and helped Lola when she was sick. Lola, a hound mix who turns 12 in May, had a large tumour removed from her spleen at the beginning of March but her prognosis is good.

Now a volunteer fixture at Charlie's every Thursday, Bessette is "unofficially in charge of loading and unloading the van," which is filled with donated pet food, toys, treats, collars, leashes, bedding and other supplies each week.

As he sorts through crates and packages in the back of the BC SPCA van,

**"I think there can be a stigma about low-income or homeless people having pets, but you can see how dedicated so many of them are to their animal companions – many will go without food to make sure their pet gets fed."**

searching for a large-dog harness, any spare dog beds and some rat food – three items specially requested by Charlie’s clients that day – Bessette reflects on how his dogs have enriched his life.

“They are my inspiration, my moral support, my mental health support,” he says. “They’re my girls. They’ve been with me through everything. I don’t know what I’d do without them.”

Bessette, who overcame addiction and mental health issues after a nervous breakdown, says he looked at his dogs one day and made a decision.

“They looked back at me and I realized, as a parent to them, I can’t have my

“ He wasn’t my dog. . . I was his person. We had the best times together. He never judged me and he was always someone to talk to.”



addiction controlling me. To come home to my dogs is everything.”

With his experience in management and the culinary skills he’s picked up over the years, Bessette is hoping to go back to school to work toward his end goal: creating meals for animals with special diets, all to be donated to those in need.

“I’d like to give back, if I can... I don’t know where I’d be without my girls. They’re my life.”

The specifics of his story may be different, but Matthews feels the same way about Bounder.

“He wasn’t my dog... I was his person. We had the best times together. He never judged me and he was always someone to talk to.”

And when Bounder got sick, the staff at the BC SPCA Vancouver Hospital were very accommodating and helpful, Matthews says.

Bounder sadly developed chronic lymphocytic leukemia, but after the

X-ray results and blood tests came back, Matthews was told medication would help and had a prescription within a few days.

“I paid a little, they paid everything else,” he says of the vet hospital staff. “It was a huge relief for Bounder to get the care he needed, when he needed it.”

It’s not just low-income pet guardians who require the support and services offered by the BC SPCA to keep their animals safe. Often, women fleeing abusive relationships need somewhere safe for their pets to stay, especially if their abuser has threatened to harm the animal as a means of control – an all-too-common occurrence.

“Research shows that women tend to stay in abusive relationships seven times longer because they fear for their animals or have no place to go with their pets,” says BC SPCA chief executive officer Craig Daniell. “That’s seven times too long and it’s why we offer compassionate board in our shelters wherever we can.” In 2017, BC SPCA branches provided compassionate boarding for 342 animals.

BC SPCA Victoria Branch manager Annie Prittie Bell, whose branch offers compassionate board to more than 60 animals each year, remembers a particularly touching case, when a woman named Janet\* contacted her from a different city, as she was attempting to set up transitional housing for herself and ensure safe housing for her puppy to flee an abusive relationship.

“She phoned me several months in advance because she was trying to make sure everything would be in place for her to be able to leave,” Prittie Bell says. “I told her to just contact us when she was ready and we’d help. For most people, there’s no way they’d leave a relationship, no matter how abusive, if they have to leave a pet behind.”

Janet concurs. “Even though [the abuse] was getting bad, I could never

have left my dog behind – my dog kept me strong. I called the BC SPCA and they were there for me and my puppy right away.”

The dog came into BC SPCA care and Janet visited him often, in between searching for a place to live and a job. “I was there every day – morning and evenings, if I could – and the staff and volunteers and everyone were so nice. They got him his shots and got him neutered. I was so appreciative. I wouldn’t be where I am now without their help.”

Eventually, over the course of several weeks, Janet found permanent housing and employment in a different city and was able to take her beloved pooch with her.

“We try to offer compassionate boarding as much as we can,” says Prittie Bell. “It is so important for women – or anyone – to know that if they’re fleeing a bad relationship, there’s a way to keep their pets safe.”

For Matthews and Bounder, access to support and services meant their special bond continued right to the end.

Bounder made it to his 12th birthday, but when he developed a swelling on his nose, it wasn’t good news. The cancer had spread. Two veterinarians helped Matthews end Bounder’s life peacefully on December 13 at the BC SPCA’s Vancouver Hospital.

“They were so good about it – they gave me my time with him... he looked so peaceful,” Matthews recalls. “Dr. Ben and Dr. Casey paid for his cremation and the hospital paid for everything else – these people go above and beyond. I’d like to pay back every penny when I can.”

Indeed, Matthews will never forget Bounder, or how the BC SPCA and its volunteers helped their transformative friendship survive.

“Bounder kept me from choosing a negative lifestyle, even when I wanted to. I don’t know what I would have done without the people who helped me keep him with me as long as possible.” ■

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\*Name has been changed to protect identity.